DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 050 CS 004 270

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TITLE Realistic Fiction for Youth.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (23rd, Houston, Texas, May 1-5, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Books; *Childrens Literature; *Fiction; Problem Solving; Reading Materials; *Realism; Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

The use of realism is valuable in children's literature when it fulfills these requirements: the subject is familiar to children; the characters are convincing; and the story is interesting, presents a hopeful solution, and deals courageously with the issues that touch the lives of the young readers. Relevant realism responds to the curiosity, intelligence, and sensitivity of today's children, children who are free to make choices and who are faced with alternatives in their personal decisions. Through identification with the struggle of a particular character or the revelation of different living styles, human motives, or elusive emotions, a young reader can develop self awareness, make thoughtful decisions, or face new encounters. (RAI)

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by

Anne Snyder

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Fiction for children of any age includes fantasy, adventure, romance, and realism. The first three are always acceptable for young people. But often realism is under the gun.

Realism deals with the complexities young people face every day - poverty, prejudice, divorce, alcohol, mental illness, pollution, homosexuality - the gamut of the human condition. Realistic books face "under-the-rug" issues with candor...yet, sometimes with resultant controversy.

There is a tendency to shield our young from all this scary stuff - maybe because we're ashamed - or maybe because we don't want to admit - even to ourselves - that our children know and are affected by it. But they do and they are. Kids know about death and drugs and dirty tricks.

Understandably, everyone wants to protect youngsters from pain and suffering...from all the ills of the world. But is a blindfold the answer?

I submit that it is not. I submit that the best protection is understanding, which comes from knowledge that they are not alone - that others have suffered as they suffer, that others have felt as they feel - that there are viable, feasible, credible ways of dealing with themselves and their world.

The value of relevant fiction for young people is that it deals, honestly and courageously, with issues that touch their

lives; stories that say upfront: "This is how it is, right now, right here."

In sharing the story character's struggle, the reader is less alone. In seeking solutions for the hero, the reader may find answers of his own. In watching the heroine wrestle with an emotion, the reader may learn more about self-awareness.

Writing such books is a challenge and a responsibility. I must admit that I have never consciously written fiction for the express purpose of helping anyone solve problems. I am a storyteller. My primary objective is to find a good story - one that I am eager to write - and to tell that story dramatically. My goal is to entertain, to share a story with my readers.

Sometimes the so-called theme - the message - the "bibliotherapeutic value" happens. If it does, it is a fringe benefit... an unexpected dividend. The reader has no trouble relating if the subject is compelling, the characters convincing, and the story interesting.

For me, it is essential to look upon the story's theme as one of importance - to the child and to me - or I would soon lose interest, and so would the reader. I don't consider the young person's problems as "cute" whether the circumstance is one of loosing a baby tooth, going out on a first date, or being afraid of the dark. I write for the child I used to be...for the child I still am! To write from the point of view of a young person, I must <u>become</u> that young person; feel his pain, walk in his shoes, struggle with him.

I have three rules for myself: 1) I never write down. 2) I never sell short the intelligence, awareness, and sensitivity

of my reader. 3) I never, never preach.

My book, 50,000 NAMES FOR JEFF, deals with a little black boy's single-handed fight against discrimination in housing. Jeff handles this problem, in an inventive way, by taking a petition around as he has seen his bigoted opposition do.

After trying other methods, this way works for him.

We are discussing the personal affects of books on children. Let me share excerpts from some letters I received from young readers:

"Dear Ms. Snyder, That book in a way was true. That is the way we treat some black people. If Jeff would of brought that petition to me I would of signed it too."

Here is another letter:

"Dear Mrs. Snyder, I think your book is good. It gave me things to think about. We have studied prejudicial this year. I think your's is a good book for someone that is prejudicial."

And another letter:

"Dear Anne Snyder, My teacher read your book in class. Afterwards some of us kids got a petition up to get my teacher to read to us a half hour every day. 30 kids signed it, and it worked! Thank you again for the book and the idea.

This came in the mail one day:

"Dear Ms. Snyder. I was mad when the white people were mean to the black people. I felt sorry for Jeff when he copied the white people by getting a petition and then only got two names on the petition at first. The story reminded me of my class. Black and white children sit next to each other and they are

friends. Our class sticks together. And in the end of your story black and white people signed the petition because they were friends. The best part I liked was when all of those names came through the mail."

I was truly humbled one day when a child prefaced her remarks by telling me that her teacher made her write to a "noteworthy person!"

Relevant books can open the minds of young people to an understanding of other people, other problems, other styles of living. The story's characters and events can sometimes strengthen the reader's understanding of human motives and circumstances, of causes and effects.

Facts revealed within the framework of an absorbing story may dispel a child's misunderstandings and fears. If a reader can relate to a story character's problem, it is possible that he will make a more intelligent decision when he is faced with a similar crisis.

We all have uncertainties and responsibilities toward ourselves and others. We are all searching for our identities as individuals. Books can guide us toward maturity and compassion as we continue to grow. They can help us determine our own sense of priorities, or even to change them.

When a youth relates to a relevant book, he can use it specifically as a tool for personal growth. These kinds of books can help the reader identify an illusive emotion; make a thoughtful decision. They can provide the reader with a way of mastering an act that he'd like to accomplish; inform him or her of a fact that is gratifying to know. Or they can be

instrumental in the triumph of a new encounter the child has been dreading.

Most kids today are resiliant, knowledgeable, and sophisticated. We patronize them or put them down if we avoid writing about the commonplace events of life...and death. It demeans the young and their interests, their ability to understand and learn.

Librarians tell me that the most "hand-worn" books are those which deal with the ills in our society. The fiction the kids want most is that which "tells it like it is."

Here are a few more excerpts from letters I received from readers:

A young adult writes: "Dear Ms. Snyder, I just finished reading, MY NAME IS DAVY-I'M AN ALCOHOLIC. I could never really identify with an alcoholic kid before I read your book. You captured the different types of kids realistically. I know kids just like those. I gave the book to my kid sister to read. I want her to know what she'll be up against when she gets to high school."

Another letter:

"Dear Ms. Snyder, You told my story in your book, FIRST STEP. My mother is an alcoholic in a state hospital. I didn't know about Alateen before. I thought you made it up. Then I found out the group was for real. My mother isn't any better, but I am."

In this letter, two youngsters collaborated:

"Dear Mrs. Snyder, We really enjoyed your book and thought it was one of the truest books we ever read. But we thought it

ended too quick and we were wondering what would happen afterwards. We would like you to write a sequel."

My response to these girls was a suggestion to try to write the sequel themselves...to work through the story problems and see what they could come up with.

Here's another letter: "Dear Ms. Snyder, I read, FIRST STEP. I then loaned it to Laurie. She read it and gave it to Sally. Sally gave it to Billy, who then gave it to Carol, who then gave it to Jenny. Each of us agreed your book was great because it shows a grownup in trouble instead of a kid for a change."

A letter I received just last week says:

"I enjoyed, FIRST STEP, very much because it dealt with a teenager and her problem with her parents. It showed me how I could deal with my many problems that will soon come up as I grow older. I guess a good book is one that you get many things out of - like FIRST STEP."

There is a great deal of discussion regarding the harm done to our children by allowing them to read realistic books. But while many adults steer their kids away from reading about "disagreeable subjects" and present them with "pretty stories," the kids, themselves, debunk the happy ending formula...the kind of story where all the loose ends are tied up at the end in a pretty blue ribbon...and they opt for the unresolved, credible stories that are told with openness.

I have never heard serious criticisms of unreal stories with "Hollywood endings;" distortions of family life where the only conflict is, who's turn it is to do the dishes. I think presenting a case for realistic books can go too far; but so

can a case for the "happily ever after" school. The real danger in either of these arguments is that a distorted picture can evolve in both cases.

Neither people nor life are all bad or all good. Millions of children know from their own experience that the good guy doesn't always win; that good will not always prevail. Misinformation about life and people cannot help him deal with them better. The misinformed child often has feelings of disillusionment, confusion, or despair. When he reads of the "perfect" hero or family, he can come away feeling "what's wrong with me?" At best, he may come away feeling cheated.

We all carp about the "system;" how entrapped individuals are in today's society. Contemporary books dealing with serious subjects allow children to look at the basic ills of our time. Most kids already know all about them. What they want to find out is <u>why</u> and <u>what</u> they can do about it. The kids need the support and approval of grown-ups to help them find out about the world in which they live, and what they can do to improve it on an idividual basis...to help change the faults in the system. There is nothing so frustrating as the feeling of helplessness, powerlessness. Can our society be harmed if children learn, early on, to face facts squarely, and deal with them in creative ways?

The heartening and refreshing thing about kids is that they still really <u>believe</u> they can change the world. In my own teaching experience, I asked the children to give me themes for stories about which they felt strongly. Most often, the topics chosen

were shyness, rejection, pain, and war. None of these themes can be found on certain adult lists of "suitable topics for children."

When I am asked by a parent, "What should my child read?" I always answer, "Whatever he wants." It is my own personal belief that young people should be allowed and encouraged to read books of all kinds: adventure, science fiction, fantasy, even comic books. When I was a kid I read whatever was available to me. That ranged anywhere from the classics to the confession magazines.

I don't think I grew up depraved; I do know some of my feelings of aggression, hostility, and other negative emotions were discharged by living them out through story characters and plots.

Young people are not as frightened of reality as some adults think. For the most part they accept it; they are ready and eager to be challenged. They are more frightened by whispered half-truths.

Personal, moral, and spiritual values are difficult to determine for ourselves and even harder to reach. But we know that children and adults, alike, are influenced by almost everything and everyone in their lives. Books that confirm the truth fill a number of needs; not the least in importance is the need to enjoy a good story just for the fun of it. If that's all a young person gets out of a book, it's enough. But just as art therapy and other therapy can help reveal a child to himself, so reading books can point the way to developing his or her own personhood.

Even those kids, whom I call "lappers" are not too young to

begin exploring their own feelings and values. (A lapper is a child who sits in an adult's lap while being told a story.) In my new picture book, THE OLD MAN AND THE MULE, the two characters constantly tease and torment each other. That they wind up together - forever - in a "push-pull," love/hate relationship is funny, but it makes its point. The youngest lapper may simply laugh, but another may learn the value of cooperation and the importance of good relationships as he or she enjoys a humorous little folk tale.

Books of comedy, satire, farce, and slap-stick have long been favorites of youngsters. Books that create laughter are therapeutic, too. What is healthier than a good bellylaugh? Literature that teaches a child to laugh at himself and at the absurdities of our lives are as important as any. There is good reason why Dr. Seuss and Charlie Brown are household words. We need more of this kind of humour. Really funny books are rare; the kind that laugh with the child, not <u>at</u> him. We need more contemporary comedy; books which view our world in a cockeyed or amusing way. And they don't necessarily need to be couched in bunny rabbits or squirrels.

As a writer, I like to "skip around." I enjoy jumping from writing lyrics for music, to writing books for lappers, to books for young adults. I like going from fiction to non-fiction; from educational material to TV screenplay; from fantasy to realism; from juvenile stories to adult stories.

I enjoy writing relevant fiction most. The gratification and rewards are great when writing realistic fiction for children. First, the child is familiar with the subject - or at least, has

heard about it. Second, there is an immediacy in realistic fiction, which hooks the reader at once. Third, allowing for good taste and sound judgement, there are endless topics from which to choose.

At a writer's conference recently, I heard a prominent book reviewer state that some writers are "exploiting" real-life situations as subjects for books for the purpose of "getting on the band wagon...going along with a trend." At the same conference, a teacher of many years told me that she's sick of all those books about drugs, divorce, and ugliness. She uses only classics in her classroom..."good" books, as it were. But if realism were only a trend, Charles Dickens, himself, would have been hard put to find subjects and characters for his books. His classics were realistic fiction when he wrote them.

Through all the media, young people are exposed to human conditions as they never have been before. Their curiosity, intelligence, and sensitivity demands our respect and response.

As opposed to children of the Victorian age, young people today have taken a great deal of personal freedom. There are not so many rights or wrongs, do's and don'ts. Issues are not so much black or white as they are gray. A good, relevant book for young readers today must reflect this new freedom...and the new responsibilities which arise from it. Kids today are faced with difficult choices, alternatives. They need and want reading material to help them make personal decisions.

I hear and read much about the value of adults sitting with their children to watch television and to discuss the program they view together. I rarely hear adults, other than teachers,

being urged to read the same books their children are reading.

What an opportunity for open-question discussion! What better way to expose the young reader's reactions to the book; his anxieties, hopes, beliefs, and joys?

A writer, too, has more freedom...and responsibilities than ever before. As a writer, I must ask myself: Is the theme of my story interesting to a young person? Is the story presented in a way which can be a valid or meaningful experience for the reader? What solutions or options does the story make available?

And last, and most important to me, does the book reflect hope for the young reader, in spite of the mind-boggling conditions of the realistic world?

One final excerpt from a young reader's letter:

"...Please, please answer my letter. I never got a letter from anyone famous before."

I always answer all letters from readers. This time I wrote back and said:

"I thank you for taking the trouble to write to me. Nobody ever said I was famous before!"